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ABSTRACT

In the quest for a definition of the good reading teacher, a review of the literature shows that new or copious materials, one specific teaching method, and static teaching behaviors are not responsible for effective teaching. However, observations of five reading teachers, with good references and good reputations but with widely divergent philosophies and personalities, show that conscientious, sensitive, and effective teaching may be accomplished by a variety of methods. A good reading teacher is creative and empathetic, preserves children's natural curiosity, provides a good variety of literary and artistic resource material, is skilled in word-attack techniques and evaluation processes, gives positive reinforcement generously, organizes time and materials to allow greater individual freedom, and tends to be concise and consistent. In short, it takes teachers with considerable integrity, ingenuity, and flexibility to achieve good results in teaching children to read. (JM)

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Defining the Good Reading Teacher

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"Good teachers are born not made." If this statement were proven true, teacher education institutions could close their doors, certification requirements could be done away with, and this article could end here. The only relatively sure way of producing good teachers would be through selective breeding. Not content at all with this solution one must turn to a search of literature and to personal observations of teachers as they teach reading and to children as they learn to read in an effort to determine who is the good teacher and, more importantly, why he is good.

New Materials?

Is good teaching a direct result of attractive, varied, and new materials? Certainly it would be a help to any teacher to have adequate materials, but it is doubtful if something so simple could be the main ingredient of good teaching. The solution to having good teachers then would be a monetary one, that of getting enough money to buy every teacher new classroom materials. A widely quoted statement by Warren Cutts (1975: 449-450) refutes this idea:

> A poor teacher will get poor results with the very best methods and materials, while a good teacher will get good results with comparatively poor ones. I believe that a good teacher should be able to teach a child to read with nothing more than a mail order catalog.

New Methods?

If not the materials then perhaps the method of teaching reading is the most significant factor. Harris and Serwer (Emans and Fox, 1973) found that if a teacher's behavior in the classroom supported a particular method--any method--that teacher was more effective than a teacher who was not behaviorally committed to a specific approach. Reading scores of children supported this. Adherence to systematic instruction did appear to benefit students.

Research does not, however, consistently support one method over another. Some experimental methods appear at first to be significantly better in the early stages of learning but follow-up studies (Cutts, 1975) have shown that by the third or fourth grade any difference attributable to method has inevitably disappeared. One of the conclusions drawn as a result of the USOE twenty-seven first

grade studies was that the teacher was a much more important factor in effective teaching than the method used. Cutts (1975) commented on a $180,000 study conducted by Educational Testing Service in Berkeley who reviewed 1,800 documents on reading released between 1960 and 1970. One conclusion drawn was that it may be possible for students to improve their reading but it is unlikely that educators can find a better way to teach it.

Teaching Behaviors

There is no doubt that some teachers are more effective in fostering children's achievement in the classroom than others. Emans and Fox (1973) concluded that these differences exist even when many important variables such as instructional method, size and socioeconomic composition of the class, reading materials and level of education of teachers are held constant. However, they are reluctant to endorse the idea of innate qualifications for being a good teacher. Being committed to the value of teacher education for preparing successful teachers, Emans and Fox (1973) did a review of literature between 1966 and 1971 on behaviors shown by good and poor teachers. The findings of the studies supported the theory that good teaching behaviors are learned. The teaching behaviors found were studied in relation to one of the following areas of influence: method prescriptions, personality variables, and perceptions of children.

Related to method prescription is the effective use of questioning techniques by the teacher. Studies reviewed indicated that many teachers tend to ask literal level, specific-answer questions

most of the time ignoring higher level questions that require more abstract thinking on the part of the child. A careful balance between lower and higher level questions is an important teaching behavior of the good teacher.

Many studies considering the personality differences among good teachers spoke in terms of teacher warmth and level of criticism used. Research indicated these should vary according to the nature of the task. Lower level reading skills are learned well with less teacher warmth and more constructive criticism, while abstract tasks are learned better with more teacher warmth and less criticism. It would be an oversimplification to say a teacher should be warm always. The nature of the learning task as well as the age of the children should be determining factors. (Emans and Fox, 1973).

Dolores Durkin (1975) noted several "little" things as she observed in classrooms that added to the teachers effectiveness as a reading teacher. Careful planning and proper timing of activities were evident in the well run classroom. Teachers who were aware of prerequisite skills for a task and who took time to check to see if children having difficulty lacked any prerequisite skills were more successful than those who taught assumptively.

In an earlier article Durkin (1974) takes a look at reading practices today as compared with behaviors of ten years ago. She states that after ten years of study and research educators continue to make the same mistakes. Teachers still feel that they are responsible for teaching only the content at a particular grade level which

creates problems for both slow and fast learners. It seems the reward for being an advanced reader is more and longer written assignments, an increase in quantity rather than quality of assignments.

Grouping practices are still a problem. For years educators have given lip service to the concept of fluid, flexible grouping. Yet in primary classes we still find three rigid groups. And unfortunately once a blue bird always a blue bird, and the same goes for the "vultures," the low group.

Misuse of the basal reader text book is still prevalent. Lesson plans in the guide are followed as though they were divinely inspired and right for every child. Workbook pages are assigned even when their content is irrelevant to the reading assignment. Elocution lessons in the form of oral reading is given much attention. Teachers ask questions about material that is neither important nor interesting.

In summary Durkin (1974) concludes that good teachers are those who have not allowed themselves to get into a professional rut. They deliberately vary the levels they teach. They acquired the habit of selecting instructional goals not in relation to grade-level but in relation to the children in their room.

Field Observations in Classrooms

After perusing the tangle of educational literature it was time to go out into the field and see what could be learned about a "good" teacher. The following is a sampling of observations of five teachers who are presently involved in a direct way with the reading experi-

ences of children in the primary grades.

Teacher number one was found from 10:10 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. hunched over a semicircle of seven six-year-olds all reading from identical basal readers. Teacher number two was in a tete-a-tete with a tot and was using diagnostic techniques to test word attack skills and comprehension. Teacher number three, one of the blue jeaned-free-school variety was observed buried in pillows, ghost stories and small giggling ghouls. Number four seemed to take the role of muse and moderator in a maze of paints, posters, papers and small printers concocting their own illustrated manuscripts. Teacher number five, a curious combination of organized originality, is a game-granny-type, just twenty-five years old. She shuffles phonics, fact and fantasies, and turns up fives, sixes, and sevens all involved at their own levels in the reading process.

All five teachers have good references, good reputations, and they all get good results in areas of word attack, comprehension, and general interest in reading. Their individual personalities, philosophies, and paraphernalia are so divergent that one asks what in the name of education unites them all? What works?

Through study and observation, it seems that no matter which ways and means one chooses to stump for, there is certain to be a conscientious, sensitive, and effective teacher doing it well his way by some other ways and means.

Teacher number one draws a small chair up close to the six-year-olds she has grouped by ability levels, and is asking them to bend their efforts to the basal reader material. She is inviting

each child to read by calling on him by name in a soft, intimate voice. They are encouraged and rewarded by this teacher's listening attitude, her uncritical help and her gentle appreciative "thank you" and added word of praise appropriate to each child's effort. She is able to create an air of discovery and surprise while sharing skills and content. This teacher enlarges on the material at hand in a conversational way. She asks lots of questions. The children talk. Teacher one makes a lively experience out of what might have been dull material. She is cheerful, courteous, encouraging, and qualified. Her way works.

The tutor's manner, teacher number two although gentle, is laced with a certain amount of decisive expectation. The rules of the task are made clear first and this teacher sits even closer to her student so the child can physically lean on her when the going gets rough. Encouraging words add support but they end with upward inflection obviously meaning "press on, kid". The teacher assures the child of the value of the material and her commitment to the process by her firm tone. The special interest of the instructor seems to be translated by the child into her own sense of self-esteem, and a happy acceptance of success when she masters the task. The atmosphere is intense, reflecting the perserverance, discipline, and patience of both student and teacher in an exciting cooperative effort that appears satisfying to both. It works.

The third teacher is in physical contact with one or more children most of the time. It's difficult to distinguish which skill he is involved with at the moment: phonic drills, sight cards, indi-

vidualized reading, telling stories, or listening to children read their own writing. This teacher offers all the necessary word skills, feed back and follow-up, but first he offers himself. He is a friend. He can be climbed on and sat on and trusted. He acts as a model. He slowly makes one origami bird, two origami birds, three and so on to show several children how it is done. He is a reliable source of sounds and spellings, and of scientific and social insights. He listens, talks, and shares. This teacher is conscientious about providing a variety of materials, and experiences, with the intention of broadening the intellectual, physical and social know-how of his students. Teacher number three delights in the written word. He provides a large library with cushions and he reads aloud every day from a wide selection on many levels. The children like him, and they listen, and they want to try it themselves. It works.

Teacher number four fits casually into the seeming chaos of creative activity on the primary level. Perhaps there are ten to twelve different projects going on all at once under her supervision. She moves about encouraging children to share materials and ideas, to talk, to teach, to evaluate kindly, and to get along. The youngest children's paintings are on the wall accented by colored paper frames and by child-dictated, teacher-printed captions. Slightly older children are encouraged to add their own stories under their pictures. A child who has just written a description of his latest project is urged to read it aloud hot off the pencil. Books are in the making that capture drawings and writings of important events in the here and now lives of sixes, sevens, and eights. This teacher has been

clear about rules of procedure before materials are taken out. She is firm and consistent throughout the day. When she gathers the class, they form a close, conspirational circle and lower their voices so that plans seem more like shared secrets. No one is too intimidated to try, to dream, or to choose. High expectations combined with gentle flexibility nurture diversity and individuality here. This teacher catches the magic of children and it works.

The fifth teacher has an orderly and analytical system for helping children through language experience materials, phonic skills, and individualized reading. Children are led toward independent work and divergent thinking with care and flair. Each week individual handwritten assignments are clipped to each child's folder. Motivational tensions are set. Teacher five gives each child her undivided attention during a daily personal conference that follows up on reading related skills. She keeps careful track of each student's program in his file and in hers. This teacher makes an abundance of materials such as word games, experience charts, graphs, stories, etc. She provides concrete evidence of her concern and commitment on a level the class naturally appreciates. This teacher sets up independent choice areas so children can work together and talk. She, too, gathers her class not only for phonic drill but to practice skills of evaluation, constructive criticism, and democratic process. She helps children feel that their whole experience is important. Reading is emphasized but not to the point of interfering with the business of childhood, so the children are both comfortable and stimulated. It works.

Conclusion

Whatever the materials, methods, or teaching techniques, they must meet the child for approval, absorption, and application. It seems any child has a better chance of developing his individual potential if he draws a creative teacher. All the teachers observed show qualities of empathy. They show a definite commitment to the child-teacher relationship. They make an effort to know the child's interest, his aim, his passions. There is room for feelings on all sides, and the courage of humility on the part of the teacher. Good reading teachers are preservers of childhood's natural curiosity and they are good providers of resource material, artistic and literary. A good reading teacher is skilled in word attack techniques, evaluation processes, and has a pocket full of positive reinforcement. Good teachers tend to be clear and concise and consistent. They are friendly, yet fair and firm. They organize the area, the day, the reading material and the records for the sake of greater individual freedom. They leave untidy corners and some unaswered questions for the sake of divergent thinking. They kindle the spark of creativity and appreciation in all areas of communication. It takes teachers with considerable integrity, ingenuity, and flexibility to secure good results in the highly emotional experience of learning to read.

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